

LAYSAN DUCK

(*Anas laysanesis*)

The Laysan Duck at times has been considered one of the rarest ducks in the world. Brought to the brink of extinction by the exploitative activities of people, the Laysan Duck is now protected as an endangered species.

DISTRIBUTION: It is found in the wild only on the 1,000-acre island of Laysan.

DESCRIPTION: Laysan Ducks are 15 to 17 inches in length. Males are dark brown with a blackish face and a white patch of feathers around the eye. The head is sometimes greenish, and the blue-green bill has black spots along the upper mandible. Adult females also have a white eye ring and tend to have more white on the head and neck. Their bill is more dull brownish-yellow. Both sexes have orange legs and feet and a bright purple-green speculum.

VOICE: The female quacks like a Mallard; the male squeaks or whistles.



A Pair of Laysan ducks on Laysan island

—Photo by W. Gagne

NESTING: Four to six pale greenish eggs are laid in nests constructed on the ground under clumps of vegetation or in thick mats of sedge or vines. The breeding season appears to last several months, from February through August.

DIET: Brine flies found in dense masses along the edge of a lagoon in the middle of the island make up a substantial part of the Laysan Duck's diet. Brine shrimp in the lagoon are an additional source of food, as are the larvae and pupae of flies found near dead seabirds. Laysan ducks are also known to feed on cockroaches and cutworm larvae of moths.

CONSERVATION NOTE: A colorful history replete with the drama of human exploitation on a fragile ecosystem has been played out on the small remote island of Laysan. It began when the Hawaiian Kingdom leased the island to a guano mining company in 1890. Guano, the excrement of seabirds, is rich in phosphates and ammonium compounds and is valued as a fertilizer. Buildings were erected, and guano was taken off the island by the shipload until it became unprofitable in 1904.

At that time, the company sold the rights of Laysan to a ship captain. In response to the demands of the millinery trade, and with the captain's approval, more than 300,000 seabirds were killed on Laysan during a six-month period. Throughout the mining and feather-hunting period, Laysan Ducks were also hunted for sport and food.

A more destructive event was the captain's introduction of rabbits to the island with the intention of starting a rabbit canning business. This enterprise failed, and in the absence of predators, the rabbit population flourished. It wasn't long before the rabbits had destroyed virtually all vegetation, and desert-like conditions prevailed. In only 20 years, three endemic land birds became extinct on Laysan, and the population of the Laysan Duck was driven dangerously close to extinction as well. Today, approximately 500 Laysan Ducks inhabit this island refuge. As part of the Northwest Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge and as a Research Natural Area, Laysan and its waters have limited access. Visitors must have a permit signed by the Refuge manager.